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Is Democracy Dishonesty? Are four men to rule New York with a rod of iron?
Is the popular voice to be stifled at the ballot-box?

S P E E C H

OF

HON. ROBERT B. ROOSEVELT,

DELIVERED AT THE

MUNICIPAL REFORM MEETING,

HELD AT

COOPER UNION, IN THE CITY OF NEW YORK, SEPT. 4, 1871.

A Democrat Defends Democracy.



NEW YORK:
JOURNEYMEN PRINTERS' CO-OPERATIVE ASSOCIATION,
No. 30 Beekman Street.

1871.

P. 128
A. 7
R. 78

Political Corruption in New York.

NEW YORK, Sept. 7, 1871.

To my fellow-Democrats, and especially to my constituents of the Fourth Congressional District:

I have been maligned by the followers of the mercenary and exclusive dynasty which at present rules the City of New York, for the course which I have thought wise to follow in reference to the charges of malfeasance made against our city officials. My action was not taken till after serious consideration, nor without the approval of many of the best and most respected Democrats of the city and State. They felt as I felt; that our party could not bear the odium resting upon us, growing out of the allegations of venality made in the public journals and wholly undenied, and that unless something were done to prove that Democracy and dishonesty were not convertible terms, we should be defeated in the next Presidential election. This opinion was originally formed on my part after consultation with the Democratic representatives of the nation at Washington, who complained that in all sections of the country the arrogance and corruption of the "Ring" were laid upon the party at large. I know that it is a very serious thing for a representative man to put himself in direct conflict with any portion of his party, and that such a step could only be justified by grave necessity. To vindicate the wisdom and sincerity of my conduct I merely ask you to read my speech, which I believe you will find places the blame of municipal misrule where it belongs, and shows that venality is not a matter of party, and that the crimes complained of are not attributable to Democracy in any just sense, nor to one party more than to the other.

Yours, very respectfully,

ROBERT B. ROOSEVELT.

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN:

I do not know whether it is exactly possible for a man to be born a Democrat, but I claim to come as near it as any one can. The earliest recollection that I have of public questions, when my arms had attained little more than seven years' pith, was my upholding staunchly and unservingly the great doctrines of Democracy. Since that time I have been a Democrat; our Democracy is like vaccination, when it once takes well, it lasts a lifetime. But as I did not believe disloyalty to mean Democracy during the war, I do not believe dishonesty to mean Democracy now. The very corner-stone of our faith is a pure, economical administration of government, and without that no code of principles can receive the hearty support of our party. Our party is a party of the people, and the people are always on the side of what is right and true. There may be, and there doubtless are, among both parties good, honorable men. Looking around me, I cannot doubt that both sides can lay equal credit in this particular. But those who love Democracy, those who have put their abiding faith in it and built up the hopes of the glory of their country on it, naturally look upon it as the representation of whatever is noblest and best.

To us Democrats, therefore, comes the charge of corruption against our rulers with a twofold force, an especial honor. To hear that the chief officers of a Democratic city, who have been elected by an overwhelming majority of Democratic votes, some of whom have been

chosen over and over again to various positions of trust, are venal and corrupt, is indeed almost incredible. And yet what is the evidence? The charges are direct, plain, and explicit; misappropriation of vast sums are alleged; time, place and circumstance are all stated through the daily press with the utmost exactness. Pretended purchases, which are in their very nature impossible, are proved to have been paid for. The building and furnishing of our New Court-House are made the pretext for the payment of bills which are not merely monstrous—they are manifestly fabulous. It is pretended that acres of plastering have been done and miles of carpeting furnished. The entire City Hall Park could have been plastered and carpeted at less expense, and no sane man can put faith in the pretence—if it were made—that the work charged for was really done. However, I must do our rulers the credit of saying that they make no such pretence. They have never denied the payments, they have not even asserted that the money was earned, while they have in every one of their lame defences impliedly admitted that the bills were extravagant, if not fraudulent. They have presumed to defy the public; they have tried to lay half the blame on the shoulders of Republicans, as if a burglar were to excuse himself by asserting that he was assisted by a fellow-burglar, and they have stated that the charges were brought by political enemies and so not entitled to answer, but nowhere has there been a straightforward, posi-

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tive refutation—nowhere a denial even of any sort.

That they are guilty no man who has read the statements doubts for a moment, and no one believes that any such sums were actually expended on the Court-House. Nevertheless I have been informed that this building, instead of costing \$3,000,000 or \$5,000,000, as alleged, the latter being supposed to be the extreme limit, has actually cost over \$12,000,000. To prove this I have been shown the figures purporting to have been taken from the Comptroller's books, but I hope I was deceived and that they were exaggerations. But of the fact distinctly alleged in the public press there can be no question; it is admitted by default that millions on millions of the public money have been paid to a few obscure individuals for which they never did nor could have performed equivalent labor; while a little printing company of \$25,000 capital has received \$1,500,000 from the county alone in two years.

Nevertheless, shocking as are these accusations, they are but trivial in comparison with the real crimes of the accused. Money is, after all, a trivial affair; we are a wealthy nation, growing with immense rapidity, rolling up capital and adding to our resources daily; we can endure limitless speculations in our officials, and still survive; but they have stolen from us something dearer and more sacred than our wealth—they have stolen our rights, our liberties, our very national institutions. Such wrongs as I have enumerated would never have been submitted to by the Democratic party had the individuals composing that party not first been deprived of the free expression of their will. These, our masters, have stolen our ballots, have falsified the will of the people, and pulled away the very key-stone of the arch of liberty.

What I am about to tell you I hardly expect you to believe; yet I will give you every point of time and circumstance. I will furnish you with every detail and all the minutiae of the mode of operations, and, large as is this meeting, were I to call my witnesses together I could fill this building as full as it is now. I know whereof I speak, and in exposing these shameless iniquities rather in defence of Democracy than in arraignment of it, I really extenuate and set down naught in malice. By a combination of certain Democratic and Republican office-holders in this city the votes of the people no longer express their will. They are falsified in three different ways, so that no matter how honest the mass of voters might be, the corrupt Ring would apparently be retained in power. To effect this three forces are brought into play. There is the use of repeaters at the polls, the manipulation of ballots as they are deposited, and the false counting of them in making up the canvass. Precisely how these schemes are managed I will explain to you.

Heretofore there has been a registry of all legal voters in this city. I can only speak of the past. I cannot tell what Tammany will do hereafter, and now that the registry law has been repealed we may be sure that matters will not be improved. There were three registers to supervise these lists, three inspectors to receive the votes, and three canvassers to count them. One of each of these boards was a Republican,

and could stop all frauds if he pleased, but as the parties to be defeated were only those Democrats who were opposed to Tammany he shut his eyes with resolute determination. To begin with, gangs of repeaters were organized whose first duty was to have their names recorded in as many districts as possible, usually from a dozen to fifty; and it was curious with what childlike innocence the Republican register would receive the names of 100 men who assumed to reside at the private dwelling of some leading Tammany Ward politician, or who pretended to camp out on some vacant lot. So the repeaters were enrolled, and I have had lists of them offered to me for sale at so much a vote when Tammany did not need them.

On election day these men went to the polls in gangs with their captains, and marched from district to district like companies of soldiers. If one of them were challenged, the result depended upon the locality; in a disreputable neighborhood, the challenger was knocked into the gutter, and probably locked up by the police for disturbing the polls. In a district where this would not answer, the accused was taken before the police magistrate, who sat all day to hear just such cases, and who let him out on bail, the necessary bail being also on hand for the purpose, and the repeater was usually back at the polls, and hard at work, before the challenger, and no one ever heard of such a case being brought to trial afterward.

In another way were these repeaters used. Many people, especially wealthy Republicans, do not vote. It is the duty of every man to vote; this is one of the obligations he assumes in demanding liberty, and, rather than have the duty neglected, Tammany sees that it is performed. Toward the latter part of the day it will be found that certain persons who are registered have not voted, and it then belongs to the polling officers to copy such names on slips and pass them to the proper parties outside; and it would horrify if not amuse some of our wealthy millionaires to see what ragged-clothed, bloated-faced, and disreputable individuals represented them at the polls, and performed for them a public duty which they had neglected. This is repeating. I have given you but a hurried sketch of it; the votes polled by it count up tens of thousands. But, successful as it was, it had its defects. The repeaters began to imagine they were their own masters; they thought they held the power because they were the instruments of power. To use a political term, they undertook to set up shop for themselves. Still repeating, when kept in its place, is not disapproved by our Ring rulers.

The manipulation of the ballots—"Ring" the ballots, as it is appropriately called—is a very beautiful operation, and it is said by those who have tried it to be perfect. It is now the favorite plan; it is simple, inexpensive and effective. When one of you good, innocent Republicans, we will suppose, is going to the polls to vote the wrong ticket or support the wrong man, as you are so fond of doing, your unwise intentions are quietly frustrated. The inspector holds in his hand the ballot you ought to deposit, and when he receives yours quietly substitutes one for the other, and drops yours on the floor before he puts his in the box. This is a simple slight-of-hand trick, easily

learned and readily applied. If, however, you are suspicious, and watch the official, or if the latter is awkward and inexperienced, a man near by pushes against you or the policeman seizes you and accuses you of having voted before. Of course ample apologies are immediately tendered for the rudeness, the inspectors are indignant that so respectable a gentleman should be insulted, they abuse the rough or the policeman, you are shown out with great respect; but your ballot went down on the floor, and the substitute got into the box. Repeating is expensive, false counting is troublesome, our Tammany men are not experts at arithmetic, and figures are often troublesome, as our amiable Comptroller will admit at this moment; but "Ringing" ballots is a complete success. It is only necessary to buy a Republican inspector, and a small place or a few hundred dollars will usually do that.

The third plan is false counting. This is done generally by transferring the figures bodily. For instance, if Jones, the Tammany candidate, gets 100 votes, and Smith, the opposition candidate, receives 200, the 200 of Smith are transferred to Jones, who gives his 100 to Smith. This is an exquisitely simple process, but in practice it is said to work badly, and great complaint is made of it by those who have tried it. In the first place, the candidates are often too nearly equal to give Tammany its just preponderance or to overcome some persistent opposition in a district where this plan cannot be worked, for it is found utterly impracticable in some districts. Its defects can sometimes be cured by a false count. That is to say, the votes are counted by tens, one canvasser taking them up and counting ten, when he calls "tally," and slips a piece of elastic around the bundle. Of course he has only to take five votes instead of ten, and call "tally" to augment greatly the chance of his favorite. In one instance this was done so enthusiastically that the Tammany candidate had received fifty "tallies," or 500 votes, and had a large quantity yet uncounted, when the poll-clerk felt it advisable to inform the canvassers that there were only 450 names on the registry.

Between these three schemes the voice of the people of New-York has been utterly stifled up until last Fall, when, by the cruel and tyrannical interference of the United States Government, under the vile bayonet election law, we got a fair vote. The wrong was not so much done to Republicans, for the inspectors saw that comparative justice was secured to their party on general issues, but it was allowed full scope against opposition Democrats—Democrats who believed in a pure government, and were opposed to Tammany Hall. Thus it is that Democrats have to bear the entire odium of the misrule of our city, while we Democrats still believe our party to be the honest one.

This odium we cannot endure. I speak as a Democrat to Democrats. If we would see a chance of carrying the next Presidential election, of taking the nation from the hands of those who, in our opinion, are unfit to have control of it, of restoring to general acceptance the principles we have at heart, we must vindicate our party; we must remove the load of

disgrace brought on us by official corruption in this city. Here we are in control. We have undisturbed possession of all branches of the municipal government, and an immense majority of voters. For all frauds, speculation, venality, and iniquity in the municipal government we are responsible, and no party with such a record will ever be given the possession of the National Administration. We must crush Tammany, or Tammany's dishonesty will crush us. Large portions of the money stolen from our treasury were used to bribe Republicans; notoriously the very charter under which we live was carried by the purchase of a Republican. Municipal officers and the spoil of our citizens have been divided between both parties. But none of this excuses us. We are in power; we can correct the abuses; if we do not, we ought to suffer, and we will. If Republicans are not blameless, we are mainly guilty.

Already we are threatened with the loss of the Germans. That economical people will not submit to have their houses mortgaged by the issue of municipal bonds in order to give to corrupt men wealth and luxury. From all sections of the country come complaints from Democrats that they have to defend the iniquities of Tammany Hall, and that they are beaten by the bad record of our city rulers. If Democracy would survive, it must put down with a strong hand these abuses. We can still do so. The people are not so entirely helpless as our masters would have us believe. The latter cannot defy an outraged and indignant community with the impunity they hope. The power is still with us if we are willing and determined to exert it. In times of great excitement the usual barriers are swept away, and the people rush along in a mighty current which carries all before it. Those who would resist it are overwhelmed and perish, but the corrupt always cower before it and are most earnest to conciliate it. So it will be here. Canvassers, inspectors, and registers, be they Democrats or Republicans, are as fond of their lives as though they were honest men; and no one appreciates the danger of irritating the people more than they. An aroused and outraged public is not patient, and Judge Ledwith laid down good law when he told his friends that if they saw an inspector tamper with their ballots they could shoot him on the spot. The man who cheats a nation out of its birthright has committed the highest of crimes, and deserves no mercy. We are living under a wrong system. To allow a Mayor, elected for two years, to appoint all other municipal officials for five years may be Tammany Democracy, but it is not ours. That system must be changed; a proper mode of selecting polling officers must be established; every protection must be given to the ballot, and, incidentally to these reforms, the Ring which has secured control of Tammany Hall must be put down, and then not only will our city's fame be redeemed, our taxes lightened, our business affairs improved, our commerce increased, and our metropolis made what it should be, the grandest city in the world, but Democracy and Republican institutions will be relieved from the discredit which has been brought upon them.

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